

FAIRY TALES REVISITED AND TRANSFORMED: ANNE SEXTON'S CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL(IZED) FEMININITY.

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(Resumen)

Este artículo es una lectura feminista de algunos poemas incluidos en *Transformations*, libro publicado por Anne Sexton en 1971. Se puede observar una conciencia de género en esta re-escritura de los cuentos de hadas tradicionales, si bien es cierto que Sexton no era quizás consciente del alcance ideológico que se atisbaba en estos cuentos transformados. Mi principal propósito es el de poner de manifiesto la actitud crítica que Sexton despliega al escribir estas versiones satíricas en tanto en cuanto el carácter androcéntrico y sexista de los discursos latentes en las versiones originales se muestra diáfano. Sus textos cuestionan la asociación patriarcal de la mujer con nociones tales como inocencia, humildad, sumisión, dulzura, obediencia, sacrificio, etc. Simultáneamente, proponen también la consideración de las figuras de "Blancanieves", "Cenicienta" y "Rapunzel" como estereotipos femeninos que ponen en práctica, voluntaria o involuntariamente, las demandas de la cultura patriarcal. Empleando una agudeza sarcástica y genio paródico ausentes en la gran mayoría de sus volúmenes precedentes, Sexton reconstruye los cuentos de los hermanos Grimm probablemente como resultado de preocupaciones personales que se hacen eco, no obstante, de situaciones vividas por otras mujeres y que, dramatizadas aquí, ponen al descubierto las formas en que la cultura dominante aparece inscrita en relación con la forma de abordar la política sexual.

Anne Sexton's volume *Transformations* both surprised and confused critics and readers at the time of its publication in 1971, since the author seemed to forsake her confessional style and adopt, if unconsciously, the precept of "writing as re-vision" formulated by Adrienne Rich in her now canonical and well-known essay. She re-writes sixteen tales from the Brothers Grimm, "told in a wisecracking Americanese that simultaneously modernizes and desentimentalizes them" (Ostriker, *Stealing*, 232). However, it would be inaccurate to argue that this book represents the complete dismissal of the personal element in Sexton's poetry, and one would rather see it as the "shift from the personal to the transpersonal" (Lauter, 25) implicit in the use of a poetic *persona* in each of the tales, but never dispensing with the notion that the author's voice lies surreptitiously underneath. As a matter of fact, Sexton herself remarked that "[this book ended up] being as wholly personal as my most intimate poems, in a different language, a different rhythm, but coming strangely, for all their story sound, from as a deep a place" (Hall, 128). In the course of this work Anne Sexton deconstructs the andocentric and masculinist values present in the original versions of the fairy tales and sarcastically reposes them from a feminine perspective, unveiling altogether the patriarchal inscription they bear. To the extent that the social construction of femininity is ostensibly endorsed in these texts, they can be viewed as well as a political commentary on the ontology of woman as a category defined by modern humanist epistemology. As Sandra M. Gilbert and

Susan Gubar, among others, have indicated, “myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture’s sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts” (36). Indeed, fairy tales voice the culture’s most cherished convictions about the forms that both male and female subjectivity should adopt as they become inserted within a given social structure. They further illustrate how modern power is subtly and cynically wielded on individual behavior but, especially, on feminine performance of language and observance of social norms. Michel Foucault has theorized the productive and positive nature of power rather than a solely juridical or oppressive character; he has examined how it socializes and disciplines individuals instead of repressing and abusing them, at the same time that it creates a self-image of detachment and impartiality which disguises its actual disciplinary goal. The French thinker maintains that “the interdiction, the refusal, the prohibition, far from being essential forms of power, are only its limits, power in its frustrated or extreme forms. The relations of power are, above all, productive” (“Power”, 118). He conceives the entity known as “power” in terms of a systematic production of technologies and disciplines that supervise individual perceptions of agency and subjectivity according to the codes and formulations that institutions such as medicine, religion, education, and so forth, have elaborated. This creation of measures destined to produce subjectivity highlights, among other things, the “local cynicism of power” (*History*, 95) by virtue of which the population is rendered unable to comprehend the extent to which they are being subdued. The production of myths and similar materials such as folk tales constitutes one among a number of strategies which aims at exercising power in the fashion that Foucault has elucidated, that is to say, neither violently nor forcefully but exhibiting instead what Ruth Bleier has categorized as the intellectual control of power¹. Feminist critics Susan Bordo and Sandra L. Bartky have analyzed the ways in which power is wielded on women in contemporary society. They have used Foucault’s notions regarding a non-violent, non-repressive power that has self-surveillance as one of its basic features. Disciplinary power, as this modality has come to be known, is closely allied to the creation of correcting and normalising technologies that purport to render the bodies docile to the demands of the system. Rather than the repression of sexuality, the French thinker observed an “incitement to discourse” in which a complex set of technologies was generated in order to ensure the control of the individuals’ bodies. In his text “Docile Bodies” (1977) he delineates the ways in which bodies are used and managed, “tamed”, in institutions such as the school or the army, and in places such as

1. Ruth Bleier has taken up the Foucauldian notion of how power has ontologized women in sexual terms by means of imposing the hysterization and pathologization of female bodies as socially and scientifically accepted discourses. This strategy evidences the two sides of power as it is exerted on women: “*intellectual control*, which through the hysterization and medicalization of women’s bodies and psychiatrization of their minds taught women their *need* to be subservient to men, though it speaks the language of love and motherhood. The other face is the unofficial and sublegal one by which sex is used for the *physical control* of women—prostitution, pornography, rape, battering, and sexual slavery—and it teaches that women *want* to be controlled, even violently”. *Science and Gender. A Critique of Biology and Its Theories on Women* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984) 182.

hospitals, factories, and so forth. Let's see how this process of docilization took place in the army:

By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has "got rid of the peasant" and given him "the air of a soldier". Recruits become accustomed to holding their heads high and erect; to standing upright, without bending the back, to sticking out the belly, throwing out the chest and throwing back the shoulders; and, to help them acquire the habit, they are given this position while standing against a wall in such a way that the heels, the thighs, the waist, and the shoulders touch it, as also do the backs of the hands, as one turns the arms outwards, without moving them away from the body... Likewise, they will be taught never to fix their eyes on the ground, but to look straight at those they pass... to remain motionless until the order is given, without moving the head, the hands, or the feet... lastly to march with a bold step, with knee and ham taut, on the points of the feet, which should face outwards ("Docile", 179-80).

Thus the objective consisted in creating responsive bodies to the technologies put in practice by given institutions or systems of power. Contemporary feminist thought has endorsed this Foucauldian formulation about the docilization of bodies, but some authors have added the contemplation of the gender element which was absent in Foucault's elaborations. As a matter of fact, they have recriminated the French author his ageneric treatment of the body, that is to say, his overlooking of the normalising and correcting techniques generated to work specifically on the bodies of women. Susan Bordo, for instance, contends that the current imposition to diet and do physical exercise must be decoded as a normalising technology generated to be applied on women. The aim to achieve a slender and taut body is implicitly fostered by the mass media through the constant representation of perfect bodies at the same time that the cosmetic and working-out equipment industries also participate in this process, for economic interests are certainly at stake here². In a similar guise, Sandra L. Bartky has examined a set of disciplinary practices that are being currently enforced so as to normalize not only the physical image of women but their behavior and social conduct as well. These mechanisms are designed to "engender a feminine body" (63) and her analysis focuses on the consideration of three main categories of disciplinary practices: "Those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures and movements; and those that are directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (64). Bartky's concern is to show the psychological tension women experience in the belief that undergoing these daily tortures (having to make up and dress properly, to walk and talk nicely, smiling and condescending to men's wishes, etc.) is a voluntary action which will turn them into "correct" or "right" women.

2. For a more detailed exposition of Bordo's thesis see "Reading the Slender Body". Mary Jacobus, E.F. Keller & S. Shuttleworth (ed.). *Body Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*. New York-London: Routledge, 1990.

My thesis below is that the social and literary construction of narratives has been not only responsive to this type of power but it actually embodies one of the multiple ways in which modern power is subtly introduced in the collective unconscious of women. Thus, it has been identified by feminist literary critics as a mechanism devised to enforce patriarchal injunctions. Significantly, the material we encounter therein is "indifferent" or "even hostile to historical considerations of gender" since it claims "universal, humanistic, natural, or even archetypal status" (DuPlessis, 106), hence warranting its success in alienating women from the ultimate realization of their potential as sovereign subjects³. The purported naturalness of the division of the spheres, for instance, that so thoroughly pervades fairy tales, testifies to the efficacy of this cultural procedure, which women internalize and tacitly assume as a truthful dispenser of womanhood. Fairy tales, then, constitute another, and very effective, normalizing discipline which show women the version of "femininity" that the social norm expects from them; they are unwarily socialized and rendered docile to the cultural discourses at work in a given society and historical period. It is not by chance, then, that the narrative voice in Anne Sexton's tales uses black-humour and irony in order to demystify the discursive subtexts that lie submerged in the tales but that surface increasingly as the poet critiques the cultural notions articulated in the stories. To my mind, they are most appropriate and useful to carry out a criticism such as Sexton's one, since the effects of the texts become much more evident in so far as women see themselves reflected in the tales. As Carol Leventen argues, "much of Sexton's achievement in *Transformations* stems from her recognition of the impact of the socialization process on women and her decision to focus on the sociocultural context—on the way her protagonists are cast into roles and proceed to play them out—" (139). Indeed, Sexton's retelling of the tales emphasizes the sexist and reductionist framework in which women have been cast and portrayed within a configuration of two polarized archetypes of essential femininity: one is innocent, submissive, fragile and angel-like (Snow-White, Little Red Riding-Hood, Cinderella); the other is an evil and cruel witch-like creature, self-assertive and independent (the queen in Snow-White, the stepmother of Cinderella or the old woman of Rapunzel). Sexton deploys her criticism mainly through a mocking tone that permeates the texts and that is intended to make the satire both subtle and incisive.

One of the cultural myths Sexton demolishes in *Transformations* is the heroic characterization traditionally assigned to male figures, by virtue of which their sole function consists in rescuing damsels in distress, bringing them back to life or, this constituting women's fundamental concern, marrying them. Fairy tales underscore the effects on women of various "alluring fantasies" (Rose, 237) which make them consider innocence, self-sacrifice and obedience as inherently feminine virtues. Conversely, women

3. I am conscious of the current status of the "Subject" as a much-debated and never definitively conceptualized notion. From the perspective of feminist theory and poststructuralist thought, the feminine Subject as a humanist transcendental presence has been widely challenged and dismissed. Instead, the constituted or constructed subject has gained a privileged position within present theoretical elaborations. However, some tendency of feminist thinking still finds valuable the conception of a feminine subject that is both independent and self-produced, thus refusing to accept the somewhat nihilistic view of subjectivity that postmodernism has endorsed.

who are unwilling to conform to the rules and refuse to be confined within this feminine mystique are systematically punished at the end. Feminist criticism has been engaged in the task of decoding the masculinist narratives inscribed in the vision that the fairy tales embody, which imposes a social order built upon the cultural articulation of masculinity and femininity in terms of opposed values and qualities. Contrary to what might be expected, Anne Sexton does not offer alternative solutions to the situations depicted in the stories and neither does she encourage women to take a more active stance. However, by presenting women as commodities rather than as human beings, Sexton managed to destabilize the androcentric ethos featuring in the tales, her lack of a clear-cut gender consciousness notwithstanding. The subversive potential of these transformed tales is made explicit in the ways the stories precipitate "a transformed view of traditional social values, particularly those associated with feminine life patterns: love and marriage, beauty, family and most radically, the idea of goodness and moral responsibility, all of which she slices through like butter" (Ostriker, *Writing*, 66). Sexton aptly builds her critique of these traditional roles upon a number of discourses that are voluntarily and unwarily assumed by women but that nonetheless curtail their personal and professional realization. Therefore, the critical significance of Sexton's recreated tales makes them resonant with the feminist task of deconstructing those narratives which bear the imprint of a patriarchal indoctrination over women. As Linda Wagner-Martin suggests, the controversial reception this volume had was due precisely to the fact that "the poems themselves were more explicit social criticism than readers expected from [Anne Sexton]" (7). Although the author retains the original structure, the tenor of these re-constructed tales is manifestly iconoclast and provocative, compelling the reader to reflect on and re-examine ideas and notions firmly embedded in the collective unconscious.

The prologues and interpolations added to the tales are worth highlighting since they represent an authorial voice which expects a given response from the reader, and which clearly evinces the narrator's involvement. Narrative voice is thus neither neutral nor objective, and this constitutes another deviation from the classical rhetorics of the fairy tales, whose narrators assumed an ahistorical and universalist perspective that reinforced the supposed acultural and atemporal significance of the tales' contents. In this respect, Anne Sexton is susceptible of being inserted within a group of women poets seeking to constitute "an anticolonial mythopoesis" (DuPlessis, 107) that is able to counteract the androcentric standpoint of the tales and to give a counter-version of the stories as they are voiced by a woman⁴. Sexton's textual procedures conform to a narrative technique that

4. The following titles constitute feminist revisions of fairy tales, which explore similar issues and make similar points to those observable in Sexton's versions: Olga Broumas, "Cinderella". *Beginning with O*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977), Angela Carter, "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost. Three Versions of One Story." *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (London: Vintage, 1993), Kavanaugh et al., *Rapunzel's Revenge* (Dublin: Attic, 1991), B. Cole, *Prince Cinders* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), R. Dahl, "Cinderella." *Revolving Rhymes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), W. Datlow and T. Windling, eds. *Snow White, Blood Red* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), J.F. Garner, "Cinderella." *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (London: Souvenir Press, 1995), T. Lee "When The Clock Strikes ." *Red as Blood or Tales from the Sisters Grimm* (New York: Daw, 1980), R. McAlpine, "Cinderella and Others." *Fancy Dress* (Auckland: Cicada, 1979), S. Namjoshi, "And Then What Happened?." *Feminist Fables* (London: Sheba Feminist

Rachel B. DuPlessis has defined as "delegitimation of the known tale" (108) by means of which the classical meaning of the text is disrupted and invalidated the normalising intent with which they were first conceived. Likewise, they may be also seen to obey the so-called "narrative displacement" technique in so far as Sexton's re-written tales imply a "committed identification with Otherness" in which the author "investigates the claims of those parts of culture and personality that are taboo, despised, marginalized" (DuPlessis, 108). As I will try to illuminate in the pages that follow, the former approach is most evident in "Snow-White" and "Cinderella", whereas the latter applies to "Rapunzel".

"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" depicts a Snow White who has "cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper, / arms and legs made of Limoges, / lips like Vin Du Rhone,". She "rolls her china-blue doll eyes, / open and shut. / Open to say, / Good Day Mama". Sexton mocks this doll-like figure, exhibited as a lifeless being, a sort of machine-like creature who opens and shuts her eyes mechanically, to greet her mother as good girls do. The reader's expectations to listen to a conventional fairy tale are promptly destroyed by the sarcastic and caustic interpolations the author disperses along the narrative. Despite its length, the introduction deserves full quoting in order to observe the original quality of Sexton's tales:

Once there was a lovely virgin
called Snow White.
Say she was thirteen.
Her stepmother,
a beauty in her own right,
though eaten, of course, by age
would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.

....

The stepmother had a mirror to which she referred
something like the weather forecast
a mirror that proclaimed
the one beauty in the land.⁵

It is worth noting that the conflict between the stepmother and Snow White is fought out in the space where masculine culture has instructed women to be rivals. The male gaze residing in women's subconscious precludes all possibilities of a female bonding within patriarchy and in this respect the mirror represents the "alienation of women from each other in patriarchal culture" (Rose, 215). In other words, the social significance of this feminine rivalry can be spelled out in the light of those disciplinary technologies that, as commented earlier, are devised by modern power so as to materialize and warrant women's tacit contribution to their colonization. Adrienne Rich has termed this phenomenon as

Publishers, 1981), M. Neylon et al., *Cinderella on the Ball* (Dublin: Attic, 1991), J. Yolen, "The Moon Ribbon." *Tales of Wonder* (London: MacDonald, 1976), J. Zipes, ed., *Don't Bet on the Prince. Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (Aldershot: Gower, 1986).

5. All quoted material refers to Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981

"horizontal hostility," and she places the emphasis on the deterioration of women's self-perception and the damage inflicted over other women as well. Similarly, Susan Bordo and Sandra L. Bartky have analysed cultural elements of our days, such as anorexia nervosa, the urge to diet or the compulsive drive to do physical exercise, as technologies of normalization whereby the effects of disciplinary power upon women are particularly manifested. To a lesser extent, using make-up and purchasing fashionable clothes are further indications of the functioning of that type of power on women. Significantly, Sexton depicts Snow White as an artefact rather than as a person, and the reference to trade names such as "Limoges" or "Vin Du Rhone" constricts Snow White within the bounds of woman's socially disciplined self. She is a representative of the ideal type of woman that fairy tales construct within their cultural vision of male and female roles and, as such, constitutes a perfect personification of the notion of femininity in the terms that society and culture have established.

The dangers of the outside world, the threat of defeminization implicit in public life, are embodied by the sexually menacing animals that Snow White encounters in her way such as the "hungry wolf" with "his tongue lolling out like a worm" or the "birds calling out lewdly,/ talking like pink parrots/ and the snakes hung down in loops,/ each a noose for her sweet white neck." Even the nice and friendly little dwarfs become "those little hot dogs" who take Snow White as a domestic assistant. The naïve Snow White falls victim of her stepmother's snares over and over, thus producing the exasperated tone in the narrator's voice who calls her "the dumb bunny." Strictly following the conventions of fairy tales, Sexton's Snow White "became the prince's bride" as reward for her purity and virtue while the stepmother is tortured "with red-hot iron shoes, / in the manner of red-hot roller skates, / clamped upon her feet" for her perversity and wickedness. The end of the tale delineates the figure of Snow White with the same nuances of ineptness and uselessness she had at the beginning; as a matter of fact she goes on "rolling her china-blue doll eyes" opening and shutting them "and sometimes referring to her mirror / as women do." This orthodox and rather ironic ending leaves the question of female agency open and without resolution. The apparent inconclusiveness of the last words, that register the overall parallelism between Snow White and the stepmother, therefore insinuating one between all women, has provoked much discussion among feminist critics. Is Sexton actually endorsing this feminine behaviour as proper and legitimate in order to retain the advantages that the masculine system grants women? Or is she just exposing an oft-repeated situation experienced by women within patriarchal society? Ellen C. Rose has very cogently proposed that Sexton's critique is not directed against women, for it becomes clear in the prologue and throughout the poem that "the cause of female narcissism is a male-dominated culture which perceives women as objects and conditions them to become objects" (215). Even the author, upon providing this oblique ending, reveals herself as another victim of that female narcissism that compels women to become aesthetic objects to be contemplated and elected as suitable wives and mothers, notwithstanding how much men despise and underrate the so-called feminine activities. In this respect, Sandra L. Bartky has clarified the system's incoherent behavior as it induces women to adapt their bodies to the official standards of beauty at the same time that it recriminates them for this very act that definitively demonstrates women's intellectual inadequacy. As Bartky puts it:

A woman's effort to master feminine body discipline will lack importance just because she does it: her activity partakes of the general depreciation of everything

female. In spite of unrelenting pressure to 'make the most of what she has', women are ridiculed and dismissed for their interest in such 'trivial' things as clothes and make-up (73).

The mirror to which Snow White will refer seems to confirm her incapacity to surpass the limitations that the culture, as Bartky suggests, has incongruently set around women to prevent the fulfilment of any faculties except those related to the private sphere, while identifying this exclusive dedication to "women's" things as an intrinsically and pathologically feminine deficiency. Apparently, Sexton has been unable to conceive a conclusion for her tale other than one which reaffirms official culture in the redundant construction of Snow White as a figure who ends up reproducing the same role that the Queen, and presumably most women, have played before her. Yet, it is my contention that Sexton's version, despite its somewhat pessimistic and unsatisfactory close, has delegitimated the traditional account of the story and thrown new light on the fairy tales' function as dominant master narratives of modern culture. Her contribution lies in having disclosed the perverse nature of these texts, whose detrimental influence on women is indirectly but insistently shown in her re-creations. By presenting Snow White referring to her mirror "as women do," that is to say, as women are forced to do, Sexton is ironising about women's actual desire to go on behaving in the same way. This equivocal last phrase still offers some doubts as to the author's real motivations upon writing it; it may be a confirmation of the culture's power upon women, which renders them unable to counteract the effects of discourses, but it might also be interpreted as the author's ironic statement of women's social destiny.

The transformation of the Cinderella story that Sexton makes is much more subversive and satirical than the one just seen in "Snow White". The ball organized to find a bride for the prince becomes a "marriage market" where Cinderella "begged to go too" but, "the way with stepmothers" is to make the sweet and saint-like Cinderella stay and do the housework. Cinderella's stepmother conforms to the stereotype of the fierce and merciless woman who makes good girls suffer and Cinderella's half sisters, in their turn, complement their mother, even surpassing her in villainy. Furthermore, both the mother and the sisters illustrate what Adrienne Rich termed "horizontal hostility" between women: since they compete to earn the favor of the prince, i.e., to earn a privileged place in a society ruled by men, they don't realize the extent to which the system shapes their lives. Sexton emphatically represents the ways in which the sisters don't hesitate to hurt themselves in order to make their feet fit into the slipper. One of them "went into a room to try the slipper on / but her big toe got in the way so she simply / sliced it off and put on the slipper." She managed to fool the prince until the white dove "told him to look at the blood pouring forth." "That is the way with amputations" the narrator sarcastically says. The other one "cut off her heel / but the blood told as blood will" and the prince "was getting tired" until "he gave it one last try" and "this time Cinderella fit into the shoe /like a love letter in its envelope." The discursive subtext beneath the whole text evidences the self-sacrificing actions that women perform in an effort to merit the male-created recompense of marriage. From this perspective, they have fallen in the patriarchal snare of accepting no matter what physical tortures in order to meet the aesthetic demands set by the male gaze which resides within themselves. Self-disciplined and unconscious of their own victimization, they have been utterly docilized. The ideological inscription which this self-disciplining bears goes unquestioned in the text, maybe because the author herself failed to

notice the socializing process hidden behind women's willingness to normalize themselves. The fact that "Sexton's heroines remain silent, passive, powerless victims frozen in—and fated to act out—the prescribed social roles in which her sources have cast them" (Leventen, 140) may be explained on the grounds of her own life-experience as a woman, that probably made her believe in the crushing and devastating effects of the social norm over individuals. All women appearing in this tale are victimized by the power of cultural discourses: the stepmother in the belief that her daughters' future depends on making a financially secure marriage; the sisters in assuming that the prince will bring happiness and self-fulfilment to their lives. Cinderella, in her turn, not so much a victim, embodies instead all traits of essential femininity at the same time that the close of her story provides a perfect justification for the view of reality that classical narratives intend to articulate. She represents the archetype of womanhood desired by and for men and the process of subliminal socialization that erases her identity completely is clearly dramatized in the text. Sexton satirizes the conventional happy endings of fairy tales:

Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
never arguing over the timing of an egg,
never telling the same story twice,
never getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.

Besides sanctioning marriage as woman's sacred destiny it is worth attending to the death-like atmosphere in which Sexton places the conclusion to the story. The world inhabited by Cinderella and her prince is characterized by its lack of life: they are described as inanimate beings who have a phony life, like two dolls in a museum, devoid of any feature that could make it human-like. In this respect, Sexton's story reinforces the lack of realism that the versions of life portrayed in classical fairy tales present for women. If they are seduced by these fantasies they might as well recognize the inconsistency of the world exhibited in the tales.

The presumptions about the moral and natural correctness of heterosexuality are undermined by Sexton in her corrosive version of "Rapunzel", which focuses on an explicitly homosexual relationship between the old woman and Rapunzel. The prologue to the story is sufficiently transparent in this respect:

A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.
The mentor
and the student
feed off each other.
Many a girl
had an old aunt
who locked her in the study

to keep the boys away.
 They would play rummy
 or lie on the couch
 and touch and touch.
 Old breast against young breast...

The disruption of the traditional version is radical and demolishing in a number of ways. First, the narrator breaks a taboo in posing the issue of homosexuality between women (They touch their delicate watches / one at a time./ They dance to the lute/ two at a time./ They are tender as bog moss). Second, she suggests it between an old woman and a young girl that incidentally results in a probable mother-daughter relationship, thus making the transgression much more powerful (They play mother-me-do / all day.) The behavior of both women implies not only the defiance of masculine rules but the explicit resistance of disciplinary power, in so much as they are dismissing heterosexuality and the social consequences involved in it, namely, marriage and motherhood. Diane Purkiss has dilucidated the political and cultural implications that the re-writing of myths contains for women writers and feminists. While I am conscious of the generic differences between myths and fairy tales, I do contend that many of her conclusions apply as well to Sexton's rewriting of fairy tales. Basically, she maintains that "by rewriting the myth –changing the narrative, changing the position of the speaker, changing the spaces available for identification – [women] are held to be at once making a dramatic break with the myths as told by the fathers, and also to be recovering the dark, secret, always unconscious truths which the fathers have struggled to repress" (444). And those are precisely the main achievements of Sexton's work as specifically observable in "Rapunzel": first, she has changed the narrative and shifted the point of view in such a way as to make possible an utterly different reading of the tale from the one proposed when it was first written. And second, she is at the same time revealing the most deeply hidden notion which was certainly present in the original configuration but which the classical version has attempted to erase: obviously enough, the historical and physical existence of erotic love among women. Borrowing Adrienne Rich's words:

Before any kind of feminist movement existed, or could exist, lesbians existed: women who loved women, who refused to comply with the behavior demanded of women, who refused to define themselves in relation to men. Those women, our foresisters, millions of whose names we do not know, were tortured and burned as witches, slandered in religious and later 'scientific' tracts, portrayed in art and literature as bizarre, amoral, destructive, decadent women. For a long time, the lesbian has been a personification of feminine evil (225).

Patriarchal culture has tried to silence the existence of lesbians, but more significantly, it has twisted and altered the real meaning that being a lesbian has, making up an image of lesbianism in totally negative terms and constructing the identity of homosexual women as a conduct against nature and allied consequently to the supernatural and diabolic sphere.

However, Sexton does not carry her alternative view to the end and the encounter with the prince involves for Rapunzel the discovery of masculine sexuality, ostensibly different from the one she had known with the old woman and necessary in order to

discipline Rapunzel into a normal sexual life. She asks herself "What is this beast [...] with muscles on his arms / like a bag of snakes? / What is this moss on his legs? / What prickly plant grows on his cheeks? / What is this voice as deep as a dog?" Margot Fitzgerald has made a psychological reading of this poem, trying to show the "crucial weakness in Freud's valorization of heterosexuality" (56) as a predominantly mature sexual condition for women and his subsequent definition of lesbianism as regressive. This excellent analysis highlights Freud's ideologically biased account of the different phases of female development: from the pre-Oedipal phase, when the intimate bond between mother and child stimulates the child's clitoral pleasure, it evolves into the Phallic phase, which he describes as the "momentous discovery of the male penis" (as cited in Fitzgerald, 57) and which is characterized by the "rejection of the clitoris in favor of the vagina, and the acceptance of a passive sexuality and self" (57). Fitzgerald's thesis is that Sexton consciously made a critique of Freud's articulation of female development, and mainly of his notion that "the female who retains an active stance toward her own bodily pleasures (by retaining a clitoral sexuality either in addition to or exclusive of vaginal sexuality) and toward her world, is arrested" (Ibid.). Whether or not Sexton approached the writing of this text with a psychological interest doesn't alter the fact of her success in questioning one of culture's most cherished tenets, namely, that of heterosexuality as the normal feminine sexuality. Furthermore, Sexton's positioning of an active female subject hood in the centre of the narrative reinforces the irreverent nature of her tale, the protagonist of which ceases being the innocent girl portrayed in the original version. Sexton's Rapunzel is no longer a child-like and gullible creature, but one with a knowledge of physical pleasure first with a woman and later with a man. The nature of the relationship between Rapunzel and the prince is unambiguously sexual:

Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.
They lay together upon the yellow threads,
swimming through them
like minnows through kelp

Masculine sexuality is here conveyed with several references to a virility that is stereotyped and conventional alike: his muscles, his hair, the deepness of his voice. Rapunzel's first reaction is one of confusion but she is finally allured by his sexual appeal, symbolized by the phallic "dancing stick". This transformation of the Rapunzel story draws the reader's attention to the compulsive heterosexuality that women, and men, for that matter, are forced to assume as natural and desirable. The happy ending of this tale is as uncertain and unconvincing as that of "Cinderella":

They lived happily as you might expect
proving that mother-me-do
can be outgrown,
just as the fish on Friday,
just as a tricycle.

Although Sexton's poetic *persona* doesn't take sides in any of her tales, the narrating voice in "Rapunzel" implicitly problematizes the issues of lesbianism, heterosexuality and femininity by means of displacing the prince from the central place he

had occupied in the original version and re-telling the story from an altogether noncanonical perspective that too obviously emphasizes the erotic nature of the bond between the two women. From this perspective, the tale discerns alternative life-styles to the official ones but simultaneously exhibits certain degree of hopelessness in concluding that, after all, the power of discourses and the effects of disciplinary technologies are too effective to conceive the world in different terms. As Adrienne Rich has pointed out, patriarchal culture is responsible for having "driven women into marriage and motherhood through every possible pressure –economic, religious, medical, and legal" and for having "literally colonized the bodies of women"; as a consequence "heterosexual, patriarchal culture has driven lesbians into secrecy and guilt, often to self-hatred and suicide" (225). This colonization of the bodies of women is tantamount to Foucault's notion of docile bodies, and while both authors disagree in the identification of those who exercise power, it is nevertheless extremely significant that the question of the body occupies a central position in the configurations of these writers. What is at stake, then, is the past and present articulation of women's bodies as surfaces to be used, managed and ultimately subjected.

"Rapunzel" has been explicated in a psychological fashion that centers on the acquisition of identity by individuals. In a very superficial mode, it can be summarized as the different stages occurring from the pre-symbolic or pre-linguistic stage, when the relationship between the mother and the child is very close and intimate—here embodied by the connection of Rapunzel with the old woman—to the Symbolic stage, when the connection with the father gets culturally established—evoked in the arrival of the prince—producing altogether the suppression of the maternal bonds and the entry of the girl into a phallogocentric domain ruled by the Law of the Father. This reading, compelling as it is, doesn't preclude the possibility of applying other interpretations, such as the cultural feminist one, if the essentialist risk is certainly one to be borne in mind. In any case, the revised tales appearing in *Transformations* make clear Sexton's "gift for iconoclasm regarding social and moral conventions for the first time" (Ostriker, *Writing*, 71), simultaneously opening up the range of her concerns and also the scope of her poetic work. Indeed, it seems to me more telling her critique of patriarchal culture in this way than if she had chosen to use conventional poetic structures. Rose Lucas has pointed out the achievement this work represents in Sexton's career in terms of her exploration of new patterns that, despite their novelty, "in fact reveal the same preoccupations with the 'adult' material of sexuality, family dynamics, religious strivings and so forth, which appear in her more 'directly' personal poetry" (74), hence evidencing the link between this work and her previous volumes. Her decision to re-present fairy tales in a critical fashion makes clear to what extent Anne Sexton was conscious of the subtle power that those texts exert on individuals, and especially women, as lessons to be learned and later performed in society.

Numerous women critics have insisted in labelling Anne Sexton as feminist, even though she was never particularly interested in the women's liberation movement. Furthermore, she didn't think of herself as a modern woman at all but as a "Victorian teenager -at heart" (Marx, 37). To a certain degree, such-like manifestations gave rise to a hostile evaluation of Sexton's poetry among feminist commentators, who observed in her traits of victimism and lack of self-respect that they deemed necessary to banish from the minds of women. In addition, the poet reacted rather vehemently whenever her work was linked in one way or another to "women's poetry," "hating the way [she] was anthologized in women's lib anthologies" (Colburn, 179). Her standpoint in this matter does not interfere, however, with the possibility of focusing on the feminist aspects of various of her

compositions, although the feminist issues are usually raised in a tenuous manner. To my mind, *Transformations* unveils Sexton's feminine concerns in more revealing ways than other texts of her poetic output that have nonetheless attracted the massive interest of both feminist and non-feminist scholars and critics⁵.

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5. The following titles analyze the poems of *Transformations* from different perspectives (feminist, cultural, literary) and they are recommended for further reading: Cathryn Essinger, "Recreating Fairyland. A Feminist Perspective: *Transformations* by Anne Sexton." *Mid-American Review* 14.2 (1994): 14-19; John Hruschka, "Anne Sexton and Anima Transformations: *Transformations* as a Critique of the Psychology of Love in Grimm's Fairy Tales." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and the Genres of Myth and Fantasy* 20.1 (1994): 45-47; Karen Michalson, "The Black Art: New Critical Transformations and Anne Sexton's 'Rapunzel'." Patrick D. Murphy, ed., *The Poetic Fantasy: Studies in an Evolving Genre* (CT: Greenwood, 1989); Cynthia A. Miller, "The Poet in the Poem: A Phenomenological Analysis of Anne Sexton's 'Briar Rose' (Sleeping Beauty)." Anna Teresa Tymieniecka, ed., *The Existential Coordinates of the Human Condition: Poetic-Epic-Tragic: The Literary Genre* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1984).

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